

Primo Levi, The Drowned and
the Saved

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THE GRAY ZONE

HAVE we—we who have returned—been able to understand and make others understand our experience? What we commonly mean by “understand” coincides with “simplify”: without a profound simplification the world around us would be an infinite, undefined tangle that would defy our ability to orient ourselves and decide upon our actions. In short, we are compelled to reduce the knowable to a schema: with this purpose in view we have built for ourselves admirable tools in the course of evolution, tools which are the specific property of the human species—language and conceptual thought.

We also tend to simplify history; but the pattern within which events are ordered is not always identifiable in a single, unequivocal fashion, and therefore different historians may understand and construe history in ways that are incompatible with one another. Nevertheless, perhaps for reasons that go back to our origins as social animals, the need to divide the field into “we” and “they” is so strong that this pattern, this bipartition—friend/enemy—prevails over all

others. Popular history, and also the history taught in schools, is influenced by this Manichaean tendency, which shuns half-tints and complexities: it is prone to reduce the river of human occurrences to conflicts, and the conflicts to duels—we and they, Athenians and Spartans, Romans and Carthaginians. This is certainly the reason for the enormous popularity of spectator sports, such as soccer, baseball, and boxing: the contenders are two teams or two individuals, clearly distinct and identifiable, and at the end of the match there are vanquished and victors. If the result is a draw, the spectator feels defrauded and disappointed. At the more or less unconscious level, he wanted winners and losers, which he identified with the good guys and the bad guys, respectively, because the good must prevail, otherwise the world would be subverted.

This *desire* for simplification is justified, but the same does not always apply to simplification itself, which is a working hypothesis, useful as long as it is recognized as such and not mistaken for reality. The greater part of historical and natural phenomena are not simple, or not simple in the way that we would like. Now, the network of human relationships inside the Lagers was not simple: it could not be reduced to the two blocs of victims and persecutors. Anyone who today reads (or writes) the history of the Lager reveals the tendency, indeed the need, to separate evil from good, to be able to take sides, to emulate Christ's gesture on Judgment Day: here the righteous, over there the reprobates. The young above all demand clarity, a sharp cut; their experience of the world being meager, they do not like ambiguity. In any case, their expectation reproduces exactly that of the newcomers to the Lagers, whether young or not; all of them, with the exception of those who had already gone through an analogous experience, expected to find a

terrible but decipherable world, in conformity with that simple model which we atavistically carry within us—"we" inside and the enemy outside, separated by a sharply defined geographic frontier.

Instead, the arrival in the Lager was indeed a shock because of the surprise it entailed. The world into which one was precipitated was terrible, yes, but also indecipherable: it did not conform to any model; the enemy was all around but also inside, the "we" lost its limits, the contenders were not two, one could not discern a single frontier but rather many confused, perhaps innumerable frontiers, which stretched between each of us. One entered hoping at least for the solidarity of one's companions in misfortune, but the hoped for allies, except in special cases, were not there; there were instead a thousand sealed off monads, and between them a desperate covert and continuous struggle. This brusque revelation, which became manifest from the very first hours of imprisonment, often in the instant form of a concentric aggression on the part of those in whom one hoped to find future allies, was so harsh as to cause the immediate collapse of one's capacity to resist. For many it was lethal, indirectly or even directly: it is difficult to defend oneself against a blow for which one is not prepared.

Various aspects can be identified in this aggression. Remember that the concentration camp system even from its origins (which coincide with the rise to power of Nazism in Germany) had as its primary purpose shattering the adversaries' capacity to resist: for the camp management the new arrival was by definition an adversary, whatever the label attached to him might be, and he must immediately be demolished to make sure that he did not become an example or a germ of organized resistance. On this point the SS had very clear ideas, and it is from this viewpoint that the

entire sinister ritual must be interpreted—varying from Lager to Lager, but basically similar—which accompanied the arrival: kicks and punches right away, often in the face; an orgy of orders screamed with true or simulated rage; complete nakedness after being stripped; the shaving off of all one's hair; the outfitting in rags. It is difficult to say whether all these details were devised by some expert or methodically perfected on the basis of experience, but they certainly were willed and not casual: it was all staged, as was quite obvious.

Nevertheless, the entry ritual, and the moral collapse it promoted, was abetted more or less consciously by the other components of the concentration camp world: the simple prisoners and the privileged ones. Rarely was a newcomer received, I won't say as a friend but at least as a companion-in-misfortune; in the majority of cases, those with seniority (and seniority was acquired in three or four months; the changeover was swift!) showed irritation or even hostility. The "newcomer" (*Zugang*: one should note that in German this is an abstract, administrative term, meaning "access," "entry") was envied because he still seemed to have on him the smell of home, and it was an absurd envy, because in fact one suffered much more during the first days of imprisonment than later on, when habituation on one hand and experience on the other made it possible to construct oneself a shelter. He was derided and subjected to cruel pranks, as happens in all communities with "conscripts" and "rookies," as well as in the initiation ceremonies of primitive peoples: and there is no doubt that life in the Lager involved a regression, leading back precisely to primitive behavior.

It is probable that the hostility toward the *Zugang* was in substance motivated like all other forms of intolerance,

that is, it consisted in an unconscious attempt to consolidate the "we" at the expense of the "they," to create, in short, that solidarity among the oppressed whose absence was the source of additional suffering, even though not perceived openly. Vying for prestige also came into play, a seemingly irrepressible need in our civilization: the despised crowd of seniors was prone to recognize in the new arrival a target on which to vent its humiliation, to find compensation at his expense, to build for itself and at his expense a figure of a lower rank on whom to discharge the burden of the offenses received from above.

As for the privileged prisoners, the situation was more complex, and also more important: in my opinion, it is in fact fundamental. It is naive, absurd, and historically false to believe that an infernal system such as National Socialism sanctifies its victims: on the contrary, it degrades them, it makes them resemble itself, and this all the more when they are available, blank, and lacking a political or moral armature. From many signs it would seem the time has come to explore the space which separates (and not only in Nazi Lagers) the victims from the persecutors, and to do so with a lighter hand, and with a less turbid spirit than has been done, for instance, in a number of films. Only a schematic rhetoric can claim that that space is empty: it never is, it is studded with obscene or pathetic figures (sometimes they possess both qualities simultaneously) whom it is indispensable to know if we want to know the human species, if we want to know how to defend our souls when a similar test should once more loom before us, or even if we only want to understand what takes place in a big industrial factory.

Privileged prisoners were a minority within the Lager population; nevertheless they represent a potent majority among survivors. In fact, even apart from the hard labor,

the beatings, the cold, and the illnesses, the food ration was decisively insufficient for even the most frugal prisoner: the physiological reserves of the organism were consumed in two or three months, and death by hunger, or by diseases induced by hunger, was the prisoner's normal destiny, avoidable only with additional food. Obtaining that extra nourishment required a privilege—large or small, granted or conquered, astute or violent, licit or illicit—whatever it took to lift oneself above the norm.

Now, one mustn't forget that the greater part of the memories, spoken or written, of those who came back begin with the collision with the concentrationary reality and, simultaneously, the unforeseen and uncomprehended aggression on the part of a new and strange enemy, the functionary-prisoner, who instead of taking you by the hand, reassuring you, teaching you the way, throws himself at you, screaming in a language you do not understand, and strikes you in the face. He wants to tame you, extinguish any spark of dignity that he has lost and you perhaps still preserve. But trouble is in store for you if this dignity drives you to react. There is an unwritten but iron law, *Zurückschlagen*: answering blows with blows is an intolerable transgression that can only occur to the mind of a "newcomer," and anyone who commits it must be made an example. Other functionaries rush to the defense of the threatened order, and the culprit is beaten with rage and method until he's tamed or dead. Privilege, by definition, defends and protects privilege.

I remember now that the local Yiddish and Polish term to indicate privilege was *protekcja*, pronounced "protektsia," and is of obvious Italian and Latin origin. I was told the story of an Italian "newcomer," a Partisan, flung into a work Lager with the label "political prisoner" when he still

had his full strength. He had been beaten when the soup was being distributed and he had dared to shove the distributor-functionary: the latter's colleagues rushed to his aid, and the culprit was made an example of by being drowned, his head held down in the soup tub.

The ascent of the privileged, not only in the Lager but in all human coexistence, is an anguishing but unailing phenomenon: only in utopias is it absent. It is the duty of righteous men to make war on all undeserved privilege, but one must not forget that this is a war without end. Where power is exercised by few or only one against the many, privilege is born and proliferates, even against the will of the power itself. On the other hand, it is normal for power to tolerate and encourage privilege. Let us confine ourselves to the Lager, which (even in its Soviet version) can be considered an excellent "laboratory": the hybrid class of the prisoner-functionary constitutes its armature and at the same time its most disquieting feature. It is a gray zone, poorly defined, where the two camps of masters and servants both diverge and converge. This gray zone possesses an incredibly complicated internal structure and contains within itself enough to confuse our need to judge.

The gray zone of *protekcja* and collaboration springs from multiple roots. In the first place, the more the sphere of power is restricted, the more it needs external auxiliaries. The Nazism of the final years could not do without these external auxiliaries, determined as it was to maintain its order within subjugated Europe and feed the front lines of the war, bled white by their opponents' growing military resistance. The occupied countries had to provide not only labor but also forces of order, delegates and administrators of the German power, which was by now committed elsewhere to the point of exhaustion. Within this category fall,

albeit to varying degrees, Quisling in Norway, the Vichy government in France, the Judenrat in Warsaw, the Saló Republic in Italy, right down to the Ukrainian and Baltic mercenaries employed elsewhere for the filthiest tasks (never in combat) and the *Sonderkommandos*, about which we will have more to say.

But collaborators who originate in the adversary camp, ex-enemies, are untrustworthy by definition: they betrayed once and they can betray again. It is not enough to relegate them to marginal tasks; the best way to bind them is to burden them with guilt, cover them with blood, compromise them as much as possible, thus establishing a bond of complicity so that they can no longer turn back. This way of proceeding has been well known to criminal associations of all times and places. The Mafia has always practiced it. It is also the only way to explain the otherwise indecipherable excesses of Italian terrorism in the 1970s.

In the second place, and in contrast to a certain hagiographic and rhetorical stylization, the harsher the oppression, the more widespread among the oppressed is the willingness, with all its infinite nuances and motivations, to collaborate: terror, ideological seduction, servile imitation of the victor, myopic desire for any power whatsoever, even though ridiculously circumscribed in space and time, cowardice, and, finally, lucid calculation aimed at eluding the imposed orders and order. All these motives, singly or combined, have come into play in the creation of this gray zone, whose components are bonded together by the wish to preserve and consolidate established privilege vis-à-vis those without privilege.

Before discussing separately the motives that impelled some prisoners to collaborate to some extent with the Lager authorities, however, it is necessary to declare the impru-

dence of issuing hasty moral judgment on such human cases. Certainly, the greatest responsibility lies with the system, the very structure of the totalitarian state; the concurrent guilt on the part of individual big and small collaborators (never likable, never transparent!) is always difficult to evaluate. It is a judgment that we would like to entrust only to those who found themselves in similar circumstances and had the opportunity to test for themselves what it means to act in a state of coercion. Alessandro Manzoni, the nineteenth-century novelist and poet knew this quite well: "Provocateurs, oppressors, all those who in some way injure others, are guilty, not only of the evil they commit, but also of the perversion into which they lead the spirit of the offended." The condition of the offended does not exclude culpability, which is often objectively serious, but I know of no human tribunal to which one could delegate the judgment.

If it were up to me, if I were forced to judge, I would lightheartedly absolve all those whose concurrence in the guilt was minimal and for whom coercion was of the highest degree. Around us, prisoners without rank, swarmed low-ranking functionaries, a picturesque fauna: sweepers, kettle washers, night watchmen, bed smoothers (who exploited to their minuscule advantage the German fixation about bunks made up flat and square), checkers of lice and scabies, messengers, interpreters, assistants' assistants. In general, they were poor devils like ourselves, who worked full time like everyone else but who for an extra half-liter of soup were willing to carry out these and other "tertiary" functions: innocuous, sometimes useful, often invented out of the whole cloth. They were rarely violent, but they tended to develop a typically corporate mentality and energetically defended their "job" against anyone from below

or above who might covet it. Their privilege, which at any rate entailed supplementary hardships and efforts, gained them very little and did not spare them from the discipline and suffering of everyone else; their hope for life was substantially the same as that of the unprivileged. They were coarse and arrogant, but they were not regarded as enemies.

Judgment becomes more tentative and varied for those who occupied commanding positions: the chiefs (*Kapos*: the German term derives directly from the Italian *capo*, and the truncated pronunciation, introduced by the French prisoners, spread only many years later, popularized by Pontecorvo's movie of the same name and preferred in Italy precisely because of its differentiating value) of the labor squads, the barracks chiefs, the clerks, all the way to the world (whose existence at that time I did not even suspect) of the prisoners who performed diverse, at times most delicate duties in the camps' administrative offices, the Political Section (actually a section of the Gestapo), the Labor Service, and the punishment cells. Some of these, thanks to skill or luck, had access to the most secret information of the respective Lagers and, like Herman Langbein in Auschwitz, Eugen Kogan in Buchenwald, and Hans Marsalek in Mauthausen, later became their historians. One does not know whether to admire more their personal courage or their cunning, which enabled them to help their companions in many concrete ways, by attentively studying the individual SS officers with whom they had contact and sensing who among them might be corrupted, who dissuaded from the crueler decisions, who blackmailed, who deceived, who frightened by the prospect of a *redde rationem* at the war's end. Some of them, the three mentioned, for example, were also members of secret defense organizations, and therefore the power they wielded thanks to their positions was

counterbalanced by the extreme risk they ran, inasmuch as they were both "resistors" and the repositories of secrets.

The functionaries described were not at all, or were only apparently, collaborators, but on the contrary camouflaged opponents. Not so the greater part of the other persons with positions of command, human specimens who ranged from the mediocre to the execrable. Rather than wearing one down, power corrupts; all the more intensely did their power corrupt, since it had a peculiar nature.

Power exists in all the varieties of the human social organization, more or less controlled, usurped, conferred from above or recognized from below, assigned by merit, corporate solidarity, blood, or position. Probably a certain degree of man's domination over man is inscribed in our genetic patrimony as gregarious animals. There is no proof that power is intrinsically harmful to the collectivity. But the power of which the functionaries of whom we are speaking disposed, even if they were low-ranking, such as the *Kapos* of the work squads, was, in substance, unlimited; or, more accurately put, a lower limit was imposed on their violence, in the sense that they were punished or deposed if they did not prove to be sufficiently harsh, but there was no upper limit. In other words, they were free to commit the worst atrocities on their subjects as punishment for any transgressions, or even without any motive whatsoever: until the end of 1943 it was not unusual for a prisoner to be beaten to death by a *Kapo* without the latter having to fear any sanctions. Only later on, when the need for labor became more acute, were a number of limitations introduced: the mistreatment the *Kapos* were allowed to inflict on the prisoners could not permanently diminish their working ability. But by then the malpractice was established and the regulation was not always respected.

Thus the Lager, on a smaller scale but with amplified characteristics, reproduced the hierarchical structure of the totalitarian state, in which all power is invested from above and control from below is almost impossible. But this "almost" is important: never has there existed a state that was really "totalitarian" from this point of view. Never has some form of reaction, a corrective of the total tyranny, been lacking, not even in the Third Reich or Stalin's Soviet Union: in both cases public opinion, the magistrature, the foreign press, the churches, the feeling for justice and humanity that ten or twenty years of tyranny were not enough to eradicate, have to a greater or lesser extent acted as a brake. Only in the Lager was the restraint from below non-existent and the power of these small satraps absolute. It is understandable that power of such magnitude overwhelmingly attracted the human type who is greedy for power, that even individuals with moderate instincts aspired to it, seduced by the many material advantages of the position, and that the latter became fatally intoxicated by the power at their disposal.

Who became a *Kapo*? It is once again necessary to distinguish. The first to be offered this possibility, that is, those individuals in whom the Lager commander or his delegates (who were often good psychologists) discerned a potential collaborator, were the common criminals, taken from prisons, to whom a career as a torturer offered an excellent alternative to detention. Then came political prisoners broken by five or ten years of sufferings, or in any case morally debilitated. Later on it was Jews who saw in the particle of authority being offered them the only possible escape from the "final solution." But many, as we mentioned, spontaneously aspired to power, sadists, for example, certainly not numerous but very much feared, because for

them the position of privilege coincided with the possibility of inflicting suffering and humiliation on those below them. The frustrated sought power as well, and this too is a feature in which the microcosm of the Lager reproduced the macrocosm of totalitarian society: in both, without regard to ability and merit, power was generously granted to those willing to pay homage to hierarchic authority, thus attaining an otherwise unattainable social elevation. Finally, power was sought by the many among the oppressed who had been contaminated by their oppressors and unconsciously strove to identify with them.

This mimesis, this identification or imitation, or exchange of roles between oppressor and victim, has provoked much discussion. True and invented, disturbing and banal, acute and stupid things have been said: it is not virgin terrain; on the contrary it is a badly plowed field, trampled and torn up. The film director Liliana Cavani, who was asked to express briefly the meaning of a beautiful and false film of hers, declared: "We are all victims or murderers, and we accept these roles voluntarily. Only Sade and Dostoevsky have really understood this." She also said she believed "that in every environment, in every relationship, there is a victim-executioner dynamism more or less clearly expressed and generally lived on an unconscious level."

I am not an expert on the unconscious and the mind's depths, but I do know that few people are experts in this sphere and that these few are the most cautious. I do not know, and it does not much interest me to know, whether in my depths there lurks a murderer, but I do know that I was a guiltless victim and I was not a murderer. I know that the murderers existed, not only in Germany, and still exist, retired or on active duty, and that to confuse them with their victims is a moral disease or an aesthetic affectation or

a sinister sign of complicity; above all, it is precious service rendered (intentionally or not) to the negators of truth. I know that in the Lager, and more generally on the human stage, everything happens, and that therefore the single example proves little. Having said all this quite clearly, and reaffirmed that confusing the two roles means wanting to becloud our need for justice at its foundation, I should make a few more remarks.

It remains true that in the Lager, and outside, there exist gray, ambiguous persons, ready to compromise. The extreme pressure of the Lager tends to increase their ranks; they are the rightful owners of a quota of guilt (which grows apace with their freedom of choice), and besides this they are the vectors and instruments of the system's guilt. It remains true that the majority of the oppressors, during or (more often) after their deeds, realized that what they were doing or had done was iniquitous, or perhaps experienced doubts or discomfort, or were even punished, but this suffering is not enough to enroll them among the victims. By the same token, the prisoners' errors and weaknesses are not enough to rank them with their custodians: the prisoners of the Lagers, hundreds of thousands of persons of all social classes, from almost all the countries of Europe, represented an average, unselected sample of humanity. Even if one did not want to take into account the infernal environment into which they had been abruptly flung, it is illogical to demand—and rhetorical and false to maintain—that they all and always followed the behavior expected of saints and stoic philosophers. In reality, in the vast majority of cases, their behavior was rigidly preordained. In the space of a few weeks or months the deprivations to which they were subjected led them to a condition of pure survival, a daily struggle against hunger, cold,

fatigue, and blows in which the room for choices (especially moral choices) was reduced to zero. Among these, very few survived the test, and this thanks to the conjunction of many improbable events. In short, they were saved by luck, and there is not much sense in trying to find something common to all their destinies, beyond perhaps their initial good health.

An extreme case of collaboration is represented by the *Sonderkommandos* of Auschwitz and the other extermination camps. Here one hesitates to speak of privilege: whoever belonged to this group was privileged only to the extent that—but at what cost!—he had enough to eat for a few months, certainly not because he could be envied. With this duly vague definition, "Special Squad," the SS referred to the group of prisoners entrusted with running the crematoria. It was their task to maintain order among the new arrivals (often completely unaware of the destiny awaiting them) who were to be sent into the gas chambers, to extract the corpses from the chambers, to pull gold teeth from jaws, to cut women's hair, to sort and classify clothes, shoes, and the contents of the luggage, to transport the bodies to the crematoria and oversee the operation of the ovens, to extract and eliminate the ashes. The Special Squad in Auschwitz numbered, depending on the moment, from seven hundred to one thousand active members.

These Special Squads did not escape everyone else's fate. On the contrary, the SS exerted the greatest diligence to prevent any man who had been part of it from surviving and telling. Twelve squads succeeded each other in Auschwitz, each remaining operative for a few months, whereupon it was suppressed, each time with a different trick to head off possible resistance. As its initiation, the next squad burnt the corpses of its predecessors. In October 1944 the

last squad rebelled against the SS, blew up one of the crematoria, and was exterminated in an unequal battle that I will discuss later on. The survivors of the Special Squad were therefore very few, having escaped death because of some unforeseeable whim of fate. None of them, after the Liberation, has spoken willingly, and no one speaks willingly about their frightful condition. The information we have about these squads comes from the meager depositions of survivors, from the admissions of their "instigators" tried in various courts, from hints contained in the depositions of German or Polish "civilians" who by chance came into contact with the squads, and lastly, from diary pages written feverishly for future memory and buried with extreme care near the crematoria in Auschwitz by some of the squads' members. All these sources are in agreement, and yet we have found it difficult, almost impossible, to form an image for ourselves of how these men lived day by day, saw themselves, accepted their condition.

At first, the SS chose them from among the prisoners already registered in the Lager, and it has been testified that the choice was made not only on the basis of physical strength but also by a deep study of physiognomies. In a few rare cases enrollment took place as a punishment. Later on it was considered preferable to pick out the candidates directly at the railroad platform, on the arrival of each convoy: the SS "psychologists" noticed that recruitment was easier if one drew them from among those desperate, disoriented people, exhausted from the journey, bereft of resistance, at the crucial moment of stepping off the train, when every new arrival truly felt on the threshold of the darkness and terror of an unearthly space.

The Special Squads were made up largely of Jews. In a certain sense this is not surprising since the Lager's main

purpose was to destroy Jews, and, beginning in 1943, the Auschwitz population was 90–95 percent Jews. From another point of view, one is stunned by this paroxysm of perfidy and hatred: it must be the Jews who put the Jews into the ovens; it must be shown that the Jews, the subrace, the submen, bow to any and all humiliation, even to destroying themselves. On the other hand, we know that not all the SS gladly accepted massacre as a daily task; delegating part of the work—and indeed the filthiest part—to the victims themselves was meant to (and probably did) ease a few consciences here and there.

Obviously it would be iniquitous to attribute such acquiescence to some specifically Jewish peculiarity: members of the Special Squads were also non-Jewish, German and Polish prisoners, although with the “more dignified” duties of *Kapos*, and also Russian prisoners of war, whom the Nazis considered only one degree superior to the Jews. They were few, because the Russians in Auschwitz were few (for the greater part having been exterminated before, immediately after capture, machine-gunned at the edge of enormous common graves): but they did not behave any differently from the Jews.

The Special Squads, being bearers of a horrendous secret, were kept rigorously apart from the other prisoners and the outside world. Nevertheless, as anyone who has gone through similar experiences knows, no barrier is ever without a flaw: information, possibly incomplete or distorted, has a tremendous power of penetration, and some of it always does filter through. Concerning these squads, vague and mangled rumors already circulated among us during our imprisonment and were confirmed afterward by the other sources mentioned before. But the intrinsic horror of this human condition has imposed a sort of reserve on all

the testimony, so that even today it is difficult to conjure up an image of "what it meant" to be forced to exercise this trade for months. It has been testified that a large amount of alcohol was put at the disposal of those wretches and that they were in a permanent state of complete debasement and prostration. One of them declared: "Doing this work, one either goes crazy the first day or gets accustomed to it." Another, though: "Certainly, I could have killed myself or got myself killed; but I wanted to survive, to avenge myself and bear witness. You mustn't think that we are monsters; we are the same as you, only much more unhappy."

Clearly what we know they said, and the innumerable other things they probably said but did not reach us, cannot be taken literally. One cannot expect from men who have known such extreme destitution a deposition in the juridical sense, but something that is at once a lament, a curse, an expiation, an attempt to justify and rehabilitate oneself: a liberating outburst rather than a Medusa-faced truth.

Conceiving and organizing the squads was National Socialism's most demonic crime. Behind the pragmatic aspect (to economize on able men, to impose on others the most atrocious tasks) other more subtle aspects can be perceived. This institution represented an attempt to shift onto others—specifically, the victims—the burden of guilt, so that they were deprived of even the solace of innocence. It is neither easy nor agreeable to dredge this abyss of viciousness, and yet I think it must be done, because what could be perpetrated yesterday could be attempted again tomorrow, could overwhelm us and our children. One is tempted to turn away with a grimace and close one's mind: this is a temptation one must resist. In fact, the existence of the squads had a meaning, a message: "We, the master race, are your destroyers, but you are no better than we are; if

we so wish, and we do so wish, we can destroy not only your bodies but also your souls, just as we have destroyed ours."

Miklos Nyiszli, a Hungarian physician, was one of the very few survivors of the last Special Squad in Auschwitz. He was a renowned anatomical pathologist, expert in autopsies and the chief doctor of the Birkenau SS whose services Mengele—who died a few years ago, escaping justice—had secured; he had given him special treatment and considered him almost a colleague. Nyiszli was supposed to devote himself in particular to the study of twins: in fact, Birkenau was the only place in the world where it was possible to study the corpses of twins killed at the same moment. Alongside this particular task of his, to which, it should be said in passing, it does not appear he strenuously objected, Nyiszli was also the attending physician of the squad, with which he lived in close contact. Well, he recounts an episode that seems significant to me.

The SS, as I already said, carefully chose, from the Lagers or the arriving convoys, the candidates for the squads, and did not hesitate to eliminate on the spot anyone who refused or seemed unsuitable for those duties. The SS treated the newly engaged members with the same contempt and detachment that they were accustomed to show toward all prisoners and Jews in particular. It had been inculcated in them that these were despicable beings, enemies of Germany, and therefore not entitled to life; in the most favorable instance, they should be compelled to work until they died of exhaustion. But this is not how they behaved with the veterans of the squad: in them, they recognized to some extent colleagues, by now as inhuman as themselves, hitched to the same cart, bound together by the foul link of imposed complicity. So, Nyiszli tells how during a "work"

pause he attended a soccer game between the SS and the SK (*Sonderkommando*), that is to say, between a group representing the SS on guard at the crematorium and a group representing the Special Squad. Other men of the SS and the rest of the squad are present at the game; they take sides, bet, applaud, urge the players on as if, rather than at the gates of hell, the game were taking place on the village green.

Nothing of this kind ever took place, nor would it have been conceivable, with other categories of prisoners; but with them, with the "crematorium ravens," the SS could enter the field on an equal footing, or almost. Behind this armistice one hears satanic laughter: it is consummated, we have succeeded, you no longer are the other race, the anti-race, the prime enemy of the millennial Reich; you are no longer the people who reject idols. We have embraced you, corrupted you, dragged you to the bottom with us. You are like us, you proud people: dirtied with your own blood, as we are. You too, like us and like Cain, have killed the brother. Come, we can play together.

Nyiszli describes another episode that deserves consideration. In the gas chamber have been jammed together and murdered the components of a recently arrived convoy, and the squad is performing its horrendous everyday work, sorting out the tangle of corpses, washing them with hoses, and transporting them to the crematorium, but on the floor they find a young woman who is still alive. The event is exceptional, unique; perhaps the human bodies formed a barrier around her, sequestered a pocket of air that remained breathable. The men are perplexed. Death is their trade at all hours, death is a habit because, precisely, "one either goes mad on the first day or becomes accustomed to it," but this woman is alive. They hide her, warm her, bring

her beef broth, question her: the girl is sixteen years old, she cannot orient herself in space or time, does not know where she is, has gone through without understanding it the sequence of the sealed train, the brutal preliminary selection, the stripping, the entry into the chamber from which no one had ever come out alive. She has not understood, but she has seen; therefore she must die, and the men of the squad know it just as they know that they too must die for the same reason. But these slaves debased by alcohol and the daily slaughter are transformed; they no longer have before them the anonymous mass, the flood of frightened, stunned people coming off the boxcars: they have a person.

Can one help but think of the "unusual respect" and the hesitation of the "foul Monatto"* when faced by the individual case, faced by the child Cecilia killed by the plague whom, in Manzoni's novel *The Betrothed*, the mother refused to let be flung on the cart together with the heaped up corpses? Occurrences like this astonish because they conflict with the image we have of man in harmony with himself, coherent, monolithic; and they should not astonish because that is not how man is. Compassion and brutality can coexist in the same individual and in the same moment, despite all logic; and for all that, compassion itself eludes logic. There is no proportion between the pity we feel and the extent of the pain by which the pity is aroused: a single Anne Frank excites more emotion than the myriads who suffered as she did but whose image has remained in the shadows. Perhaps it is necessary that it can be so. If we had to and were able to suffer the sufferings of everyone, we could not live. Perhaps the dreadful gift of pity for the

* The men employed to bury the dead during a plague.

many is granted only to saints; to the Monatti, to the members of the Special Squad, and to all of us there remains in the best of cases only the sporadic pity addressed to the single individual, the *Mitmensch*, the co-man: the human being of flesh and blood standing before us, within the reach of our providentially myopic senses.

A doctor is called, and he revives the girl with an injection: yes, the gas has not had its effect, she will survive, but where and how? Just then Muhsfeld, one of the SS men attached to the death installations, arrives. The doctor calls him to one side and presents the case to him. Muhsfeld hesitates, then he decides: No, the girl must die. If she were older, it would be a different matter, she would have more sense, perhaps she could be convinced to keep quiet about what has happened to her. But she's only sixteen: she can't be trusted. And yet, he does not kill her with his own hands. He calls one of his underlings to eliminate her with a blow to the nape of the neck. Now, this man Muhsfeld was not a compassionate person; his daily ration of slaughter was studded with arbitrary and capricious acts, marked by his inventions of refined cruelty. He was tried in 1947, sentenced to death and hung in Krakow and this was right, but not even he was a monolith. Had he lived in a different environment and epoch, he probably would have behaved like any other common man.

In *The Brothers Karamazov* Grushenka tells the fable of the little onion. A vicious old woman dies and goes to hell, but her guardian angel, straining his memory, recalls that she once, only once, gave a beggar the gift of a little onion she had dug up from her garden. He holds the little onion out to her, and the old woman grasps it and is lifted out of the flames of hell. This fable has always struck me as revolting: what human monster did not throughout his

life make the gift of a little onion, if not to others, to his children, his wife, his dog? That single, immediately erased instant of pity is certainly not enough to absolve Muhsfeld. It is enough, however, to place him too, although at its extreme boundary, within the gray band, that zone of ambiguity which radiates out from regimes based on terror and obsequiousness.

It is not difficult to judge Muhsfeld, and I do not believe that the tribunal which sentenced him had any doubts. On the other hand, in contrast to this, our need and our ability to judge falters when confronted by the Special Squad. Questions immediately arise, convulsed questions for which one would be hard pressed to find an answer that reassures us about man's nature. Why did they accept that task? Why didn't they rebel? Why didn't they prefer death?

To a certain extent, the facts available to us permit us to attempt an answer. Not all did accept; some did rebel, knowing they would die. Concerning at least one case we have precise information: a group of four hundred Jews from Corfu, who in July 1944 had been included in the squad, refused without exception to do the work and were immediately gassed to death. We have learned of various individual mutinies, all immediately punished by an atrocious death (Filip Müller, one of the squads' very few survivors, tells of a companion whom the SS pushed into the oven alive), and many cases of suicide at the moment of recruitment, or immediately after. Finally, it must be remembered that it was the Special Squad which in October 1944 organized the only desperate attempt at revolt in the history of the Auschwitz Lager.

The information about this exploit that has come down to us is neither complete nor without contradictions. It is known that the insurgents (the personnel of two of the five

Auschwitz-Birkenau crematoria), poorly armed and without contacts with the Polish Partisans outside the Lager or the clandestine defense organization inside the Lager, blew up Crematorium no. 3 and engaged the SS in battle. The battle was soon over, and a number of the insurgents managed to cut the barbed wire and escape to the outside but were captured soon afterward. Not one of them survived: approximately four hundred and fifty were immediately killed by the SS; among the latter, three were killed and twelve wounded.

Those whom we know about, the miserable manual laborers of the slaughter, are therefore the others, those who from one shift to the next preferred a few more weeks of life (what a life) to immediate death, but who in no instance induced themselves, or were induced, to kill with their own hands. I repeat: I believe that no one is authorized to judge them, not those who lived through the experience of the Lager and even less those who did not. I would invite anyone who dares pass judgment to carry out upon himself, with sincerity, a conceptual experiment: Let him imagine, if he can, that he has lived for months or years in a ghetto, tormented by chronic hunger, fatigue, promiscuity, and humiliation; that he has seen die around him, one by one, his beloved; that he is cut off from the world, unable to receive or transmit news; that, finally, he is loaded onto a train, eighty or a hundred persons to a boxcar; that he travels into the unknown, blindly, for sleepless days and nights; and that he is at last flung inside the walls of an indecipherable inferno. This, it seems to me, is the true *Befehlnotstand*, the "state of compulsion following an order": not the one systematically and impudently invoked by the Nazis dragged to judgment and, later on (but in their footsteps), by the war criminals of many other coun-

tries. The former is a rigid either/or, immediate obedience or death; the latter is an internal fact at the center of power and could have been resolved (actually often was resolved) by some maneuver, some slowdown in career, moderate punishment, or, in the worst of cases, the objector's transfer to the front.

The experiment I have proposed is not pleasant. Vercors tried to describe it in his story *Les Armes de la nuit* (Albin Michel, Paris, 1953), in which he speaks of "the death of the soul," and which reread today seems to me intolerably infected by aestheticism and literary lechery. Undoubtedly, however, it deals with the death of the soul. Now nobody can know for how long and under what trials his soul can resist before yielding or breaking. Every human being possesses a reserve of strength whose extent is unknown to him, be it large, small, or nonexistent, and only through extreme adversity can we evaluate it. Even apart from the extreme case of the Special Squads, often those of us who have returned, when we describe our vicissitudes, hear in response: "In your place I would not have lasted for a single day." This statement does not have a precise meaning: one is never in another's place. Each individual is so complex that there is no point in trying to foresee his behavior, all the more so in extreme situations; nor is it possible to foresee one's own behavior. Therefore I ask that we meditate on the story of "the crematorium ravens" with pity and rigor, but that judgment of them be suspended.

The same *impotentia judicandi* paralyzes us when confronted by the Rumkowski case. The story of Chaim Rumkowski is not exactly a Lager story, although it reaches its conclusion in the Lager. It is a ghetto story, but so eloquent on the fundamental theme of human ambiguity

fatally provoked by oppression that I would say it fits our discourse only too well. I repeat it here, even though I have already told it elsewhere.* On my return from Auschwitz I found in my pocket a curious coin of light alloy, which I have saved to this day. Scratched and corroded, on one side it has the Hebrew star (the "shield of David"), the date 1943, and the word *getto*; on the other side is the inscription *QUITTUNG ÜBER 10 MARK* and *DER ÄLTESTE DER JUDEN IN LITZMANNSTADT*, that is, respectively, *Receipt for ten marks* and *The elder of the Jews in Litzmannstadt*. In short, it was a coin for internal ghetto use. For many years I forgot about its existence, and then, around 1974, I was able to reconstruct its story, which is fascinating and sinister.

In honor of a certain General Litzmann, who had defeated the Russians during World War I, the Nazis had rechristened the Polish city of Lodz "Litzmannstadt." During the final months of 1944 the last survivors of the Lodz ghetto were deported to Auschwitz, and I probably found that now useless coin on the ground in the Lager.

In 1939 Lodz had seven hundred and fifty thousand inhabitants and was the most industrialized Polish city, the most "modern" and the ugliest: it made its living from the textile industry, like Manchester and Biella, and it was conditioned by the presence of a myriad of small and large factories, which were mostly antiquated even then. As in all cities of a certain importance in occupied Eastern Europe, the Nazis hastened to set up a ghetto in it, reinstating, aggravated by their modern ferocity, the regime of the medieval and Counter-Reformation ghettos. The Lodz ghetto, begun as early as February 1940, was first

* In *Moments of Reprieve* (New York: Summit Books, 1986).

chronologically and, after Warsaw's, second in number: it grew to more than one hundred and sixty thousand Jews and was disbanded only in the autumn of 1944. So it was the longest lived of the Nazi ghettos, and this must be attributed to two reasons: its economic importance and the perplexing personality of its president.

His name was Chaim Rumkowski. A failed minor industrialist, after varied travels and uneven fortunes he had settled in Lodz in 1917. In 1940 he was almost sixty and a widower without children. He enjoyed a certain esteem and was known as the director of Jewish charities and as an energetic, uncultivated, and authoritarian man. The position of president (or elder) of a ghetto was intrinsically frightful, but it was a position. It constituted social recognition, raised one a step up the ladder, and conferred rights and privileges, that is, authority—and Rumkowski passionately loved authority. How he happened to obtain the investiture is not known. Perhaps it was simply a hoax in the sinister Nazi style (Rumkowski was, or seemed to be, a fool with an air of respectability—in short, the ideal dupe); perhaps he himself had intrigued to be chosen, so strong in him must have been the will to power. The four years of his presidency, or, more precisely, his dictatorship, were an astonishing tangle of megalomaniac dream, barbaric vitality, and real diplomatic and organizational skill. He soon came to see himself in the role of absolute but enlightened monarch, and he was certainly encouraged along this path by his German masters, who, true enough, toyed with him, but appreciated his talents as a good administrator and man of order. He obtained from them the authorization to mint currency—both in metal (that coin of mine) and on water-marked paper that was officially supplied him—which was used to pay the exhausted workers in the ghetto. They

could spend it in the ghetto stores to acquire their food rations, which on the average amounted to eight hundred calories a day (although at least two thousand are needed to survive in a condition of total repose).

From these famished citizens of his, Rumkowski aspired to obtain not only obedience and respect but also love: in this respect modern dictatorships differ from the ancient ones. Since he disposed of an army of excellent artists and craftsmen ready to perform at his slightest hint in exchange for a quarter loaf of bread, he gave orders to design and print stamps bearing his effigy, with his snow-white hair and beard haloed by the light of Hope and Faith. He had a carriage drawn by a skeleton nag in which he rode through the streets of his minuscule kingdom, streets crowded with beggars and postulants. He had a regal mantle and surrounded himself with a court of flatterers and henchmen; he had his courtier-poets compose hymns in which "his firm and powerful hands" were celebrated, as well as the peace and order which thanks to him reigned in the ghetto. He ordered that the children in the nefarious schools, devastated daily by epidemics, malnutrition, and German raids, should be assigned essays in praise "of our beloved and providential president." Like all autocrats, he hastened to organize an efficient police force, ostensibly to maintain order, but in fact to protect his own person and impose his discipline: six hundred guards armed with clubs, and an unspecified number of spies. He delivered many speeches, some of which have been preserved for us and whose style is unmistakable: he had adopted the oratorical technique of Mussolini and Hitler, the style of inspired recitation, the pseudo-colloquy with the crowd, the creation of consent through subjugation and plaudir. Perhaps this imitation of his was deliberate; perhaps instead it was un-

conscious identification with the model of the "necessary hero" who at the time dominated Europe and was sung by D'Annunzio. More likely, however, his attitude sprang from his condition as a small tyrant, impotent with those above him and omnipotent with those below him. He spoke like a man who has throne and scepter, who is not afraid of being contradicted or derided.

And yet his figure was more complex than it may appear thus far. Rumkowski was not only a renegade and an accomplice; to some extent, besides convincing others, he must have progressively convinced himself that he *was* a messiah, a savior of his people, whose welfare, at least at intervals, he must certainly have desired. One must benefit in order to feel beneficent, and feeling beneficent is gratifying even for a corrupt satrap. Paradoxically, his identification with the oppressor alternates, or goes hand in hand, with an identification with the oppressed, because, as Thomas Mann says, man is a mixed up creature. He becomes all the more confused, we might add, the more he is subjected to tensions: at that point he evades our judgment, just as a compass goes wild at the magnetic pole.

Even though he was constantly despised and derided by the Germans, Rumkowski probably thought of himself not as a servant but as a lord. He must have taken his own authority seriously: when the Gestapo, without warning, seized *his* councilmen, he came courageously to their rescue, exposing himself to jeers and slaps which he knew how to endure with dignity. On other occasions he tried to bargain with the Germans, who kept exacting more and more cloth from Lodz and from him ever more numerous contingents of useless mouths (children, old and sick people) to send to the gas chamber in Treblinka and, later on, Auschwitz. The very harshness with which he hastened

to repress signs of insubordination on the part of his subjects (there existed in Lodz, as in other ghettos, nuclei of bold political resistance, with Zionist, Bundist, or Communist roots) did not originate so much in servility toward the Germans, as in lese-majesty, indignation over the outrage inflicted on his regal person.

In September 1944, as the Russian front approached, the Nazis initiated the liquidation of the Lodz ghetto. Men and women by the tens of thousands were deported to Auschwitz, *amus mundi*, ultimate drainage site of the German universe. Worn out as they were, they were all eliminated almost immediately. About a thousand men remained in the ghetto, to dismantle the machinery of the factories and cancel the traces of the slaughter. They were liberated by the Red Army shortly afterward, and it is to them that we owe the information recorded here.

About Chaim Rumkowski's final fate two versions exist, as though the ambiguity under whose sign he lived was protracted to envelop his death. According to the first version, in the course of the ghetto's liquidation he supposedly tried to oppose the deportation of his brother, from whom he did not want to be separated, whereupon a German officer, it is said, proposed he should leave voluntarily with his brother, and he is supposed to have accepted. Another version claims instead that Rumkowski's rescue was attempted by Hans Biebow, another figure drenched in duplicity. This shady German industrialist was the functionary responsible for the ghetto's administration and at the same time its exclusive contractor. Hence, his was a delicate position, because the textile factories in Lodz worked for the armed forces. Biebow was not a ferocious beast. He was not interested in creating useless suffering or punishing the Jews for the sin of being Jewish, but he

was interested in profiting from his contracts, in both legitimate and other ways. The torment in the ghetto touched him, but only indirectly. He wanted the slave-workers to work, and therefore he did not want them to die of hunger: his moral sense ended there. In reality, he was the true master of the ghetto, and he was linked to Rumkowski by that buyer-supplier relationship which often becomes a crude friendship. Biebow, a small jackal too cynical to take race demonology seriously, would have liked to put off forever the dismantling of the ghetto, which, for him, was an excellent business deal, and to preserve Rumkowski, on whose complicity he relied, from deportation. Here one sees how often a realist is objectively better than a theoretician. But the theoreticians of the SS thought otherwise, and they were the stronger. They were *grundlich* radicals: get rid of the ghetto and get rid of Rumkowski.

Unable to deal with the matter otherwise, Biebow, who had good connections, handed Rumkowski a letter addressed to the Lager of his destination and guaranteed that it would protect him and assure him special treatment. Rumkowski supposedly asked for and obtained from Biebow the right to travel to Auschwitz—he and his family—with the decorum becoming his rank, that is, in a special car, attached to the end of a convoy of freight cars packed with deportees without privileges. But there was only one fate for Jews in German hands, whether they were cowards or heroes, humble or proud. Neither the letter nor the special carriage were able to save Chaim Rumkowski, the king of the Jews, from the gas chamber.

A story like this is not self-contained. It is pregnant, full of significance, asks more questions than it answers, sums up in itself the entire theme of the gray zone and leaves

one dangling. It shouts and clamors to be understood, because in it one perceives a symbol, as in dreams and the signs of heaven.

Who was Rumkowski? Not a monster, nor a common man; yet many around us are like him. The failures that preceded his "career" are significant: few are the men who draw moral strength from failure. It seems to me that in his story it is possible to recognize in an exemplary form the almost physical necessity with which political coercion gives birth to that ill-defined sphere of ambiguity and compromise. At the foot of every absolute throne, men such as Rumkowski crowd in order to grab their small portion of power. It is a recurrent spectacle: we remember the deadly struggles during the last months of World War II in Hitler's court and among the ministers of Mussolini's Republic of Saló; they too gray men, blind first and criminal later, frenziedly dividing among themselves the shreds of an iniquitous and moribund authority. Power is like a drug: the need for either is unknown to anyone who has not tried them, but after the initiation, which (as for Rumkowski) can be fortuitous, the dependency and need for ever larger doses is born, as are the denial of reality and the return to childish dreams of omnipotence. If the interpretation of a Rumkowski intoxicated with power is valid, then the intoxication occurred not because of but rather despite the ghetto environment. In other words, the intoxication with power is so powerful as to prevail even under conditions seemingly designed to extinguish all individual will. In fact, in him as in his more famous models, the syndrome produced by protracted and undisputed power is clearly visible: a distorted view of the world, dogmatic arrogance, the need for adulation, convulsive clinging to the levers of command, and contempt for the law.

All this does not exonerate Rumkowski from his responsibilities. That a Rumkowski should have emerged from Lodz's affliction is painful and distressing. Had he survived his own tragedy, and the tragedy of the ghetto he contaminated, superimposing on it his histrionic image, no tribunal would have absolved him, nor, certainly, can we absolve him on the moral plane. But there are extenuating circumstances: an infernal order such as National Socialism exercises a frightful power of corruption, against which it is difficult to guard oneself. It degrades its victims and makes them similar to itself, because it needs both great and small complicities. To resist it requires a truly solid moral armature, and the one available to Chaim Rumkowski, the Lodz merchant, together with his entire generation, was fragile. But how strong is ours, the Europeans of today? How would each of us behave if driven by necessity and at the same time lured by seduction?

Rumkowski's story is the sorry, disquieting story of the *Kapos* and Lager functionaries, the small hierarchs who serve a regime to whose misdeeds they are willingly blind, the subordinates who sign everything because a signature costs little, those who shake their heads but acquiesce, those who say, "If I did not do it, someone else worse than I would."

Rumkowski, a symbolic and compendary figure, must be placed in this band of half-consciences. Whether high or low it is difficult to say: only he could clarify this if he could speak before us, even lying, as he perhaps always lied, also to himself. He would in any case help us understand him, as every defendant helps his judge, even though he does not want to, even if he lies, because man's capacity to play a role is not unlimited.

But all this is not enough to explain the sense of urgency

and threat that emanates from this story. Perhaps its meaning is vaster: we are all mirrored in Rumkowski, his ambiguity is ours, it is our second nature, we hybrids molded from clay and spirit. His fever is ours, the fever of our Western civilization that “descends into hell with trumpets and drums,” and its miserable adornments are the distorting image of our symbols of social prestige. His folly is that of presumptuous and mortal Man as he is described by Isabella in *Measure for Measure*, the Man who,

Dressed in a little brief authority,
 Most ignorant of what he's most assured,
 His glassy essence, like an angry ape
 Plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven
 As makes the angels weep.

Like Rumkowski, we too are so dazzled by power and prestige as to forget our essential fragility. Willingly or not we come to terms with power, forgetting that we are all in the ghetto, that the ghetto is walled in, that outside the ghetto reign the lords of death, and that close by the train is waiting.